

COM 655:
The Mediated Self and Changing Relationships

Book Review:
You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto
(Jaron Lanier, 2010)

Adam Bernstein
Queens University of Charlotte

Introduction

Jaron Lanier is prominent computer scientist who, among many achievements, is considered an architect of virtual reality technology. This pioneering work in his field, however, has not necessarily been Lanier's greatest claim to fame, at least the popular kind. In *You are Not a gadget: a manifesto* published in 2010, Lanier presents a compelling critique of how digital design is negatively influencing our culture in different and profound ways. In this respect, he acts as the proverbial "canary in the coal mine" by revealing the corrosive social effects from hugely popular and seemingly positive aspects of modern digital experience such as social media, collective "wiki" composition, and the online dissemination of music, video and other creative content.

Summary

Lanier's premise is that certain negative behaviors are borne from design assumptions that have become "locked in" to our digital experience. Examples include the desirability of anonymity in many personal engagements and the inherent wisdom of groups over that of the individual. Lanier uses his ample technical expertise and experience to make his case, citing computer programming decisions and design as evidence. But he is also a philosopher, and ultimately lays the blame for the phenomena that concern him with us, individual users and citizens, for ceding the responsibility of shaping such an important facet of our lives.

The entire book is a portrait in computer mediated experience, i.e. how human behaviors and attitudes are affected by the digital design elements used to render them. Anonymity is a major theme in Lanier's critique. In many instances such as online chat rooms, discussion forums and even product reviews, there is the assumption that shielding the commenter's identity is desirable for myriad reasons. As Lanier points out, human nature unfortunately has produced

some unforeseen results that are starkly counter to this supposition. Highly abusive behaviors such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying and “trolling” -- which Lanier describes as “not a string of isolated incidents, but the status quo in the online world” (p. 61) -- are prime examples. Lanier describes anonymity as follows:

Anonymity certainly has a place, but that place needs to be designed carefully. Voting and peer review are pre-Internet examples of beneficial anonymity. Sometimes it is desirable for people to be free of fear of reprisal or stigma in order to invoke honest opinions. To have a substantial exchange, however, you need to be fully present. That is why facing one’s accuser is a fundamental right of the accused” (p. 63).

Lanier delves into the personal reductive nature of the Internet, a manifestation of which is the tendency to prioritize collective thinking, i.e. the “hive mind,” over individual thinking (p. 68). Lanier cites another author, James Surowiecki, who described this in terms of the “wisdom of crowds” (p. 55). As illustration, Lanier points to Wikipedia which “implicitly celebrate(s) the ideal of intellectual mob rule.... Whether they are cordial or not, Wikipedians always act out the idea that the collective is closer to the truth in the individual voice is dispensable” (p. 144). According to Lanier, the digital realm reinforces this perceived primacy by routinely placing Wikipedia citations at the highest position in online searches.

Personal reduction to Lanier also reflects the illusion that individuals are in control of their online behaviors and manifestations, when in reality they are being categorized and manipulated using algorithms and other built-in digital conventions. He maintains that social media is rife with examples:

An individual who is receiving a flow of reports about the romantic status of a group of

friends must learn to think in terms of the flow if it is to be perceived as worth reading at all. So here is another example of how people are able to lessen themselves so as to make a computer seem accurate. Am I accusing all those hundreds of millions of users of social networking sites of reducing themselves in order to be able to use the services? Well, yes I am. (p. 53).

Even the attempt to withdraw from social media can be a vivid reminder of how enmeshed we are, according to Lanier:

To those trying to delete their Facebook accounts, I say ‘welcome to the coercive power of legacy in digital networks.’ You can’t reasonably expect to arrange for that magic moment when everyone and everything in your life can get out of the dominant social network at the same time. To get out, you therefore must sever part of your life. So if you get in deep enough, you get trapped. Stop calling yourself a user. You are being used (p. 200).

Lanier finds this digital trend away from holding up the value of the individual highly objectionable:

Facebook... organiz(es) people into multiple choice identities, now Wikipedia seeks to erase point-of-view entirely. If a church or government were doing these things, it would feel authoritarian, but when technologists are the culprits, we seem hip, fresh, and inventive. People will accept ideas presented in technological form that would be abhorrent in any other form. It is utterly strange to hear my many old friends in the world of digital culture claim to be true sons of the Renaissance without realizing that using

computers to reduce individual expression is a primitive, retro grade activity, no matter how sophisticated your tools are (p. 48).

The most important takeaway from *You are not a gadget* may be an implicit warning that our senses of humanity are diminished, if not overtly threatened, by the dynamics of digital communications that have become increasingly dominant in our lives. Innate abilities of individual creation and expression are being lost. As a musician and author, Lanier finds online file-sharing and content amalgamation, which he calls “mush-making” (p. 48), especially troubling. He also sees the commercialization of search engines, social media sites and other applications as an ominous sign:

If you want to know what's really going on in a society or ideology, follow the money. If money is flowing to advertising instead of musicians, journalists, and artists, then a society is more concerned with manipulation than truth or beauty. If content is worthless, then people will start to become empty-headed and contentless” (p. 83).

Similarly, some of the principles of what Lanier describes as the “cybernetic totalism” of the Internet, such as anonymity and crowd identity, are not conducive to productive and healthy interpersonal relations: “It shouldn't be much of a surprise that these designs tend to reinforce indifferent or poor treatment of humans” (p. 75).

Conclusion

Although I share many of Lanier's concerns, I do not believe that the current digital paradigm and how it is evolving are entirely incompatible with social ideals that we hope to achieve. In other words, to fix the Internet's perceived shortcomings and have a more effective

solution, we do not have to tear down the existing digital infrastructure and start from scratch as Lanier suggests. Despite their flaws, digital communications have many merits that are worth salvaging. They have facilitated social goods by giving voice to oppressed populations under authoritarian rule, raising awareness for innovation and entrepreneurial endeavors, and making it possible to organize large and dispersed groups on common efforts such as mapping interstellar space. These applications reflect the tremendous creative and intellectual capacity of the user, human beings, to derive something worthwhile through digital media. Lanier would seem to concur in this assessment by describing a lesson from history about another important communications innovation, the printing press: “People, not machines, made the Renaissance. The printing that takes place in North Korea today, for instance, is nothing more than propaganda for a personality cult. What is important about printing presses is not the mechanism, but the authors” (p. 46).

Reference

Lanier, J. (2010). *You are not a gadget: A manifesto*. New York: Vintage.